



NEIL MACGREGOR, *A HISTORY OF THE WORLD
IN 100 OBJECTS*, FIRST PUBLISHED IN PRINT
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KAJA SZYMAŃSKA

Uniwersytet Jagielloński, Kraków

Only stable, rich and powerful states can commission great art and architecture that, unlike text or language, can be instantly understood by anyone – a great advantage in multilingual empires.

Neil MacGregor¹

The book *A History of the World in 100 Objects* is a result of a multi-platform BBC and British Museum joint enterprise released in 2010. It offered an innovative look at history and the role of a museum, and was a great success in popularising knowledge, and history in particular. The whole project involved 550 heritage partners and comprised several media outlets: a six-month long series of daily broadcasts by BBC Radio 4, a website through which individual users and other institutions could also contribute, uploading objects of their own choice, and finally, the book to which this review specifically relates. The radio programme drew 4 million listeners and podcast downloads amounted to over 10 million during the

¹ N. MacGregor, loc. 3542/9008.

following year (only just over 5.7 million from the UK). Additionally, individual and institutional contributors uploaded 3240 objects to the project's website accompanied by short historical narratives. In recognition of the accomplishment of the undertaking, in 2011 the British Museum was awarded the Art Fund Prize. The chair of the judges, Michael Portillo, admitted that the jury was "particularly impressed by the truly global scope of the British Museum's project" and the fact that it "went far beyond the boundaries of the museum's walls". He also emphasised the "truly pioneering use of digital media, [that] has led the way for museums to interact with their audiences in new and different ways."² These features were also appreciated in numerous favourable reviews that flourished in 2010 and 2011³. The global dimension and the redefining of a museum's relation with its public were the bargaining chip for which the project bought its popularity and acknowledgement. Yet this coin has also its other, imperial side.

The preparation for the radio programme took four years and was overseen by Mark Damazer, Controller of Radio 4. The broadcasting of the 100 part series began on 18th January 2010 and lasted, with two holiday breaks, until 22nd October. It was divided into 20 weeklong parts, each of which consisted of 5 episodes broadcast on weekdays. The programme was run by an art historian and the British Museum director Neil MacGregor who engaged historians of specific areas and periods along with specialists in other fields, like industrial design, fashion design, architecture, archaeology, economy, sociology, philosophy, mathematics, and many others

² M. Portillo, cited from the speech given during the ceremony held at Tate British, 15 June 2012 London. Source: <http://www.artfundprize.org.uk/art-fund-prize-winner-announced.php> (consulted 23 December 2012).

³ For instance, T. Holland's review in "The Guardian", 7 November 2010, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/nov/07/history-of-world-100-objects-review> (consulted 27 December 2012); G. Riddihough, *Objectifying Our Past*, "Science", 23 March 2012, Vol. 335, no. 6075, p. 1444; C. Vogel, *Stuff That Define Us*, "The New York Times", 28 October 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/30/arts/design/history-of-the-world-in-100-objects-from-british-museum.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0 (consulted 30 December 2012); S. Roulac's review in the "New York Journal of Books", posted online 12 March 2012, <http://www.nyjournalofbooks.com/book-review/history-world-100-objects-handaxe-credit-card> (consulted 31 December 2012); E. Lambourn's review – one of only few texts that makes an attempt at thorough analysis of the project's scientific value, "Journal of Global History" 6 (2011), pp. 529–533.

as additional commentators. In each 15-minute episode they presented a historic narrative built around one object selected from among the Museum's collection. On their website BBC provides a permanent access to all the broadcasts as well as to their transcripts and images of the discussed objects.

In the *Preface* and *Introduction* to the book MacGregor sets out to take an inventive look at history. Instead of written accounts, he uses objects as historical sources. MacGregor recognises that "Telling history through things is what museums are for."⁴ In and of itself this is not at all original. But in MacGregor's view things tell a more democratised version of history because, unlike texts, objects represent the world of both literate and illiterate, victorious and conquered. Yet nowhere does MacGregor express awareness that the choice of objects alone is quite significant, since unless completely random it is inevitably arbitrary. It therefore allows all kinds of selective narratives and does not necessarily offer a voice to those that textual records pass over in silence. This is why Damazer set certain rules when it came to choosing concrete objects for the project: he aimed at telling a global history of humanity that would cover "as far as possible equally" the whole world, whole societies and all aspects of human experience.⁵ We recognise here a search for a kind of history from below which might be considered one of the project's greatest assets.

This is why among the chosen objects are both everyday articles and works of art, although not typical fine art highlights. All of them are artefacts, that is, products of human labour,⁶ and not, for example, elements of landscape or animal remains. However, it is difficult or even impossible to draw the line between what is and what is not art in this collection. In fact, one of the first conclusions reached in the book is that the eternal human aspiration to do things better is about producing "tools that are not only more efficient but also more beautiful."⁷ So the utilitarian items described

⁴ MacGregor, loc. 141/9008.

⁵ MacGregor, loc. 149/9008. Whether "the goal of equitably covering the whole world was reasonably realized", as Roulac assures, is probably a matter of the geographical-cultural point of view, as the numbers precisely established by Roulac present themselves as follows: Europe 27, Asia 24, Middle East 22, North America 13, Africa 6, Latin America 5. Roulac 2012.

⁶ D. Miller, *The Artefact as Manufactured Object*, in *Design Studies: A Reader*, ed. by H. Clark, D. Brody, Oxford 2009, p. 231.

⁷ MacGregor, loc. 694/9008.

in the book include a whole variety of things like money (several coins and a Ming banknote from 1375) or cookery utensils (e.g. a several-thousand-year-old bird-shaped pestle from Papua New Guinea), but also cult objects (like Taino ritual seat, Santo Domingo, Carribbean, 13th–16th c.), items related to war (Sutton Hoo helmet, England, 7th c.) and conquest (Mexican codex map, late 16th c.), musical instruments (Chinese bronze bell, 5th c. BC) and many others. The choice of art works *sensu stricto* also encompasses many widely differing forms: from Dürer's woodcut picturing a rhinoceros (Germany, 1515) or the Miniature of a Mughal prince (India, about 1610), to architectural elements like the Parthenon sculpture of Centaur and Lapith (Greece, c. 440 BC) or decors (Harem wall painting fragments, Iraq, 9th c.), to what we can consider applied art in the form of Paracas Textile (Peru, 3rd c. BC) or the Russian Revolutionary Plate (Soviet Russia, 1921).

MacGregor emphasises that all the objects are sources of information not only about the world they were designed in and made for but also about the people who came across them later, changing the things' functions, value and meaning. In their biographies artefacts are subjects not only to decay but also to the practice of reuse, refashioning, recycling and finally collecting. Furthermore, it is highly significant that new technologies enable us to reopen historical investigations and obtain new answers, both from the artefacts whose origin and purpose has until now been unclear, and those that seemed utterly familiar. In result of the objects' own diachronies and our changing methods of examining them, as time goes by they accumulate meaning⁸ and become a sort of palimpsest:

The African wooden slit drum is [...] a remarkable example of an object's many lives. Made in the shape of a calf for a ruler probably in the northern Congo, it was re-branded as an Islamic object in Khartoum, and then, captured by Lord Kitchener, carved with Queen Victoria's crown and sent to Windsor – a wooden narrative of conquests and empires.⁹

⁸ S.M. Pearce, *Objects as meaning; or narrating the past*, in *Interpreting Objects and Collections*, ed. by S.M. Pearce, London & New York 2006, p. 19 and MacGregor, loc. 262/9008.

⁹ MacGregor, loc. 270/9008.

The same applies to the few written records discussed in the book: the Flood Tablet, (northern Iraq, about 7th c. BC), the Rhind Mathematical Papyrus (Egypt, about 1550 BC), the Rosetta Stone (Egypt, 196 BC) and some objects on which text appears as something additional, like the annotated Mexican codex map (late 16th c.). Even these textual sources are treated as things and the predominant assumption is that, apart from what is written, the artefact contains information pertaining to other phenomena, often unrelated to the story told in the text. Whatever events are reported on the Flood Tablet, the material existence of this record triggered in the 19th century a discussion on the controversial subject of trustworthiness of biblical narratives. Thus, the deciphering of the tale of the great deluge inscribed on the Mesopotamian clay tablet brought about a change in our thinking similar in its scale to that caused less than a century ago by the discovery of the 13,000 years old Clovis spear point in New Mexico, USA.

Yet not only the sources, but also the order in which they are organised is characteristic of this project. The narrative in the *History of the World* reflects the flow of time, but the sequence of parts and objects is not purely chronological. Time periods outlined by consecutive parts are of different length (from roughly 2 million years to less than a century) and they often overlap each other (in fact, parts thirteen and fourteen both correspond to the same years 1200–1400). What is more, within a chapter the story goes back and forth and even beyond the time frames given in the chapter's subtitle. The latter might be considered imprecision, that, since it is prevalent all over the book, gives an impression of negligence. But it could also be taken that the boundaries between periods are blurred deliberately to emphasise that cultural phenomena do not have concrete time limits. Whether or not this operation is intentional, it brings us to the notion of time underlying specific chronology of the book. It is thus made so as to highlight distinctive cultural features of the certain periods, no matter how long they last. It rejects the focus on short span and therefore the history of events. Instead, the five artefacts within each part are chosen from different places all over the globe to create a global outlook for particular times. Inevitably, being only "refracted through individual objects,"¹⁰ major political events are moved from the centre to the periphery of interest. Such time division has clear Braudelian undertones, especially in view of

¹⁰ MacGregor, loc. 175/9008.

the parts that cover the years 1680–1820 and 1780–1914 precisely corresponding to the notions of the long eighteenth and nineteenth centuries respectively (nb. Eric Hobsbawm, the author of concept of “the long nineteenth century”, was engaged in the project as a contributing commentator). And although the long sixteenth century is not mentioned in the book due to the global character of the history it aims to present, the *longue durée* is certainly one of the auspices of the project.

Also noteworthy is the interpretative technique employed by MacGregor to investigate the objects’ histories. Besides tools provided by archaeology, anthropology and other sciences, in order to ‘decipher’ historic information conveyed by things MacGregor states the necessity of employing imagination, which in the case of the *History of the World* results in a set of vivid, witty and extremely engrossing stories. Unfortunately, it also seems that imagination is sometimes an excuse for certain abuses in reasoning, like drawing universal conclusions from individual facts. For instance, the fact that the Olduvai stone chopping tool has to date been the only 2,000,000-year-old object found anywhere in the world serves as the proof that all humans come from one place of origin. Another weak point of the book is the tendency towards generalisation that, for example, allows MacGregor to ascribe certain beliefs to the Egyptian priest Hornedjitef on the basis of what all Egyptians believed in. It may be historically insignificant whether the priest was actually convinced of the truthfulness of the religion he served, but then to claim his private views a fact seem neither necessary nor even credible. Even the way he was interred does not allow us to make more than assumptions about his personal opinions, as it is those still alive who decide how to bury the dead. And MacGregor proves to be aware of that elsewhere in the book. On the other hand, such simplifications seem inevitable in order to link individual objects with whole societies and so to consider them records of a wider cultural order, which is the strategy MacGregor goes in for.

Another thing is that in contrast to declarations stated in the opening chapters is the author’s frequent use of historical knowledge drawn from other sources to speculate about the objects of his interest, rather than scrutinising and interpreting the artefacts themselves in order to milk them for all they are historically worth. Surprisingly enough, not only does he allow himself to look into things from the past through the spectacles of our own experience of the present, but he also frankly states that in this

way we can actually understand past societies. And he bases his view on the assumption that we are essentially alike.¹¹ While this procedure, involving for instance a contemporary cook commenting on an ancient cookery aid, produces exceptionally interesting results, it remains highly controversial in the view of past and present cultural clashes, as well as the discussion on otherness and the Other.

When it comes to the global aspect of the project, the important thing is that it is such not only due to world history being its subject. In the *Preface* MacGregor stresses three things: first of all, that the origins of the British Museum's collection are unquestionably global and the choice of artefacts deliberately reflects that. Secondly, the BBC radio broadcasts to every part of the globe and so the range of the project was worldwide, not limited only to the British Isles or Europe. And finally, commentators invited to contribute to the project came from many different places across the world forming a truly international team. But what seems to be most innovative in terms of globality here is the way MacGregor used objects to link distant places, peoples and times. He investigated journeys that individual objects made across the world to establish a global net of cultural-material connections. It is palpable throughout the book but evident especially in parts 10, 12 and 16 that deal with global movement of people, goods and ideas. The subtitle of part 12 could actually serve as a subtitle of the whole book: "How trade, war and religion moved objects around the globe".

Finally, we should scrutinise the ultimate purpose of this global character of the project. Over the course of history as told by MacGregor we observe a symptomatic turn towards Britain, which intensifies in the early modern period. It is not without significance, if we take into account that the British Museum, founded in 1753, holds an incomparable collection of things from all over the world as a result of Britain's colonial conquests, and every now and then other nations claim their rights to items that somewhere in the past belonged to them. It is the case of the Parthenon sculptures, the Lewis Chessmen or the Mummy of Hornedjitef, to name only a few things. To resolve the question of "Where do things from the past belong now?"¹² MacGregor invokes the notion of common heritage.

¹¹ MacGregor, loc. 225/9008.

¹² MacGregor, loc. 432/9008.

He links separate items with multiple places and eristically proves that in a result of trade, war or other kind of cultural exchange, in their rich past objects may have belonged to many different peoples. That they have come into the property of Britons is in a way a natural course of history. Thus, not only does he make connections between distant places, he also inseparably ties the past to the present. But it should also be noticed that he inscribes objects from the British past within the global history too, like when he examines the early Victorian tea set that linked a tea-drinker with “virtually every continent on the globe”¹³ or when he renders the Suffragette’s coin a symbol of the universal idea of the right to vote. In this way the *History of the World* is not only an academic undertaking, but it has a clear rhetoric and political dimension as well. Thanks to the cooperation with BBC and its global range, it was a resounding success in terms of promoting the British Museum with its global heritage and the idea of the Great imperial Britain and its continuous global impact. Only a stable, rich and powerful state can afford a great museum in which the imperial history told through objects can be instantly understood by everyone – a great advantage in a multilingual empire.

¹³ L. Colley, cited in MacGregor, loc. 7538/9008.